

Briand, Premier Seven Times, T. R. of France

By PAUL TYNER

THE "come-back" of Aristide Briand, now Premier of France for the seventh time, is an event full of meaning for the future of France and of the world. It plainly demonstrates the failure of Millerand's scheme to retain real power by making a political nonentity the nominal premier, when he himself ex-noniemently the Premiership for the Presidency a few short months ago. Briand's choice is equally convincing demonstration of the break-up of the "National Bloc"—the coalition of parties on which Clemenceau triumphantly rode back into power in November, 1919. Composed as it was of essentially conflicting elements, Royalists and Republicans, Clericals and Socialists, reactionaries and radicals, it was of doubtful permanency from the first. It lacked any real coherence or solidarity in conviction and policy. Even as to the trumpeted common interest in opposition to "Bolshevism," as a basis of unity there was much make-believe, and thinly hidden mutual distrust. The more or less flaming jingoism, built upon surviving passions of the war, plainly lacked cohesive qualities as a cement.

But the chief significance of Briand's return to power is its demonstration of the depth and genuineness of his countrymen's appreciation of his outstanding greatness of character. He is, by common consent, the most brilliant of living French statesmen in debate and the Republic's ablest administrator. Briand, indeed, bears more than a surface resemblance to our own Roosevelt. He has the same virile "fighting face" and the same forcefulness and directness of speech. The two men are much alike in rock-ribbed honesty and practical idealism. Roosevelt's sterling Americanism is paralleled by the French premier's sturdy and unflinching devotion to the true glory of France. And finally, Briand, like Roosevelt, is a forward-looking man, a true Progressive. The differences between the American and the French leaders are such as may be largely accounted for by the differences between the Latin and the Anglo-Dutch temperaments. Although more dramatic in action than his American congener Briand gives one the impression of more restraint and deeper reserve of power. The funny little squeak in Roosevelt's voice when he got excited and which with other mannerisms he was clever enough to make effective—is never heard in the full, even tones of Briand's voice. The more intense and excited he becomes, the quieter and more restrained is he in voice and manner. If there is any of the rash impetuosity of Roosevelt in Briand's make-up, he controls it marvelously. He never loses his head and never slops over. There is probably no better balanced man in public life on either side of the Atlantic unless it is perhaps the Italian premier, Signor Giolitti.

I shall never forget the occasion of his actual come-back in the Chamber of Deputies on March 21, 1919, when he caused such a sensation by his re-entry on the political scene just two years to a day after surrendering the premiership. During the interval he had practically effaced himself from the stage of political activity, never mounting the tribune although the most eloquent orator in the Chamber of Deputies. He contented himself with yeoman's service in support of the government's war effort in his place as deputy for Saint-Etienne, which constituency he represented for sixteen years, rendering especially valuable service as chairman of the committee on foreign relations. The debate was on the electoral reform bill—a subject on which Briand was thoroughly informed and which he had much at heart. Seldom have I listened to a more moving speech, eloquent in phrasing and delivery, logically clinching and profoundly impressive. In a voice by turns warmly caressing and almost brutally compelling in its challenge, he declared that the old *scrutin d'arrondissement* had outlived its usefulness and that the day had arrived for the *scrutin de liste*, the *scrutin de justice*, if the country was to go forward and not sink supinely into the slough of despond. In the public life of the country, he continued, great ideas broke themselves against the walls of the petty districts in which the deputy began and ended by attending to his own little affairs, each one managing his own local fight. It was natural under the circumstances that a man should turn for support to local interests having a respectability of their own and local ambitions that were entirely legitimate so far as they did not impinge on the larger interests of the nation. Without this reform, the country could not fulfill its destinies.

For months the government had been playing hide and seek with the measure and at that very moment was endeavoring to stifle it in a senate committee. Driven into a corner, Clemenceau, who was present, was forced to concede that the law would be put into application at the next elections. This was actually done in November, although the measure was finally put through was hobbled by a species of gerrymandering in the matter of the method of proportional representation laid down.

During Briand's speech, I watched his face closely, at the same time noting its effect on the assembly which crowded the chamber to the doors. He spoke for about three-quarters of an hour and was listened to with a concentrated attention in the midst of a religious si-

lence, unbroken save when the deputies broke into bursts of uncontrollable applause. It was testimony to the depth of the impression made by Briand's eloquence that on the conclusion of his speech the discussion was immediately closed—although his opponents were in the majority.

Following this dramatic return to the political stage, it was very generally expected that Briand would be Clemenceau's successor in the premiership, no matter how the elections went. The "Tiger" had already signified his intention to retire and it seemed very probable that he would win the dignified crowning of his career by an election to the presidency of the republic. Jealous of Briand, however, he took care to block his accession to power at that time by having his friend and henchman, Millerand, made premier. Briand waited. He knew he could bide his time, letting subside the

glamour of Clemenceau's popularity as the "Father of Victory" and the noise and dust it stirred up.

Through it all his friends knew, and many of his enemies knew, that it was really to the wisdom and the efficacy of Briand's direction of affairs during the two most critical years of the war that victory was made possible. One of these friends cleverly declared that Clemenceau was like one of the servants hired at the eleventh hour who received the same wages from the Master of the Vineyard as those who had labored through the heat and burden of the day, as related in the Bible parable—except that in this case the eleventh-hour servant was given an even larger wage than that paid to the man who had done the spadework by which France had so richly profited.

The story is told that, a few days before the signing of the armistice, M. Briand was dining with several British "high personages," one of whom eulogized the marvelous courage which France had shown in the war and the immortal glory which she had gained.

"Yes, dear friend," responded M. Briand, "France has always loved the laurels. But, since 1870, her cooks have learned that laurel is excellent in the sauce. Today, having culled such admirable laurels, she will see to it that the sauce is not lacking."

"Are you quite sure?" asked the distinguished Briton smiling.

And the average Frenchman will comment on this story with a sigh: "Alas! that Briton knew what he was talking about. France has not made a good sauce with its laurels. Even as France failed properly to prepare for the war during the peace, she failed to prepare for the peace during the war."

This certainly was not the fault of Briand. When in office, he well understood the dangers of the situation created by the fact that the Allies, having divergent and often opposed interests and which made it necessary that they should arrive at a common understanding in order that they should not find themselves in disaccord at the moment when Germany would be obliged to capitulate. This was why he arranged with England the question of the Cameroons and of Asia Minor, on which two points France profited during the peace negotiations. He sent M. Doumergue to Russia to obtain *carte blanche* on the Rhine, and, in the month which preceded his fall, he charged M. Paul Cambon, French ambassador in London, to bring about a similar understanding with England for the settlement of the question of the left bank of the Rhine in consonance with French interests. More than this M. Briand instituted three great parliamentary commissions charged with the study of this essential question. The first, presided over by Senator Morel, an especially competent man for the task, was to investigate the financial consequences of a neutralization of the Rhine provinces. The second occupied itself with problems relating to mines and industry, and the third was to take up the study of the rights of France in the Rhenish territories from the historical point of view. As to the labors of M. Paul Cambon, they were not followed up by any of Briand's three successors, MM. Ribot, Poincaré and Clemenceau. Consequently, France lost the advantage of having in her hands a prior engagement on the part of Britain when the Allied and associated powers came to sit down at the peace table. The three commissions continued their labors after the fall of Briand and had furnished to the government reports of the highest importance; but it seemed as if the delegates at the Peace Conference had not at all taken them into account and Mr. Wilson was not even acquainted with the fact of their existence. It is believed by Briand's friends that, but for this neglect, France and the world would have been spared the seven months' long-drawn-out discussions at the Peace Conference and that we would, the world over, be by this time far on the way to re-established economic conditions. As it was, he had secured Britain's signature to an agreement defining in advance the French zone of influence in Asiatic Turkey. In this zone was included Mosul, because it was considered that great economic interests must be taken into account, and in

the Mosul area there are important oil springs. In Cilicia, also, the question of cotton growing was deemed an essential factor in the territorial settlement. This was revealed by Briand in a statement in the chamber on March 28 last in the course of a debate on territorial questions, during which he made the striking statement that the future belongs to the nation which controls the world's oil supply.

Perhaps the greatest speech of M. Briand's entire career was that made by him on June 25 last, when, intervening in a discussion of the budget for foreign affairs, he delivered a most telling criticism of the Peace Treaty and of the surrender by Clemenceau of all the advantages that had been gained for France by the agreements of 1916. "What a terrific indictment of Clemenceau!" exclaimed one of the deputies at the conclusion of Briand's speech. But when one came to read it next day in the official report, it was noted that he had not even mentioned Clemenceau's name.

He was returned to the chamber for his native city of Nantes at last November's election and has loyally sustained the government of M. Millerand whenever he could do so conscientiously, not failing to express admiration for Millerand's "ability" on the one hand, nor to criticize him frankly on the other. On the question on which M. Leygue's ministry was overthrown, that is, failure to acquaint the chamber with the facts concerning recent negotiations with Britain, it is certain the new premier will insist on taking the country into fullest confidence. What is more, his important part in previous negotiations with Britain will aid him in maintaining a firm attitude.

Remembering that Briand was the first Socialist premier of France, there may be some inquietude in the minds of Americans unacquainted with the complexities of French political parties. For the benefit of such, it may be said that in France a Socialist is not necessarily a revolutionist, nor even an extremist. Briand, like Millerand, is a Socialist of the Right-Center. His party plays the important rôle of balance-wheel between the extreme of royalist reaction on the one hand and that of Socialism of the extreme Left tending to Sovietism on the other. The illuminating fact is that he has won out although regarded as "fallen outside the breastworks" by all parties. He resumes the helm as spokesman of the sober second thought of France, of the will to discard partisan squabbling and get to work in earnest on the great and arduous task of national reconstruction. He realizes, as he put it in his electoral address last November, that in order that France shall be able to function properly and pay her debts, the coffers of the individuals must be opened, not with crowbars, but with arguments of justice and social solidarity. As for those deaf to such arguments, he promised that the law should see to them.

The unhorsing of Leygues and of his master, Millerand, means also the unhorsing of British influence in French affairs—and of the invisible influence back of Lloyd George to that extent.

To Briand, the socialization of government and industry must be an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process. His socialism may be regarded, indeed, as the very antithesis of the Bolshevism of Lenin and Trotsky, Longuet and George Lansbury. In the elections of November, 1919, Briand went before his constituents at Nantes on a platform declaring that the first duty of the French people was to re-establish the financial situation of the country and to so organize its economic resources as to enable them to realize the fruits of the victory and to assure to France a rôle in the world equal to its prestige. For this, he went on, the splendid national solidarity realized by Frenchmen during the war should not be broken by the peace, especially as they still waited for guarantees of good faith from the enemies of yesterday. But union should not spell confusion and the country must send to the new parliament men with an ideal and a program, for the young republics born of the war, waited impatiently for France, faithful to her traditions, to light their way by orienting the republic toward a future of social progress, realized in order and legality, and assuring to all security of person and of property. He declared himself a champion of liberty of political opinion and said he wished to see maintained the work of the republic based on neutrality in matters of religious belief. To fight the high cost of living, there must be fullest production and freedom of commerce. That the exhausted treasury of the state might be replenished, reforms were necessary to the proper functioning of the social mechanism. In the domain of the relations between capital and labor, it would be necessary to assure to capital "conditions of stability and security," and to the workers "the benefits of wages corresponding to the profits of the enterprise." His program stressed the question of finance which is even more pressing now than it was at that time. Fiscal reforms were outlined entailing a gradual reduction in the enormous volume of paper money, which is in large degree responsible for high prices and for the alarming depreciation of the franc in foreign exchange. In regard to the question of armaments, M. Briand went on record as declaring that its solution would be found in the prior complete disarmament of Germany which would alone make it safe for her late enemies to disarm.

The new premier's declaration of his policy and program soon to be presented to the chambers will probably be found to conform closely to this outline of his views a year ago. He declined at that time to join Clemenceau's national bloc.

In his triumphant "come-back," it seems certain that he will rally the best elements in the nation to his support in steadily pursuing a program of genuinely constructive and progressive reform, of which the country is sadly in need.



M. A. BRIAND